

# AMASS

*Magazine*

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**Film (making) Preservation**

**The Town Hall Retooled**

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**ISSUE 96  
NUMBER 4  
VOLUME 30**

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# AMASS

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**COVER:**

“REEL AND IMAGINED”

JOHN O'KANE AND HELI SWENSSON

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**“REEL AND IMAGINED”**

Cover Design by John O'Kane and Heli Swensson

Have you seen the Martin Scorsese film, *Hugo*? Set in 1930s Paris, it follows an orphaned boy as he searches for turn-of-the-century special effects wizard Georges Méliès. I found the film to be magical throughout. But something wasn't right and I couldn't put my finger on it. Nor, apparently, could the cinema cognoscenti. While *Hugo* received critical praise, it flopped at the box office.

The solution to the conundrum came from an unlikely source, my nephew Alexander Marcus, a professor and a scholar of antiquity. The film was indeed magical throughout, he observed, and therein lies the problem. When Dorothy is whisked from Kansas to the land of Oz, the film shifts from muted sepia to vibrant technicolor. Not so with *Hugo*—it's relentlessly fantastical from the first frame. We never get to experience Méliès's world of imagination from the standpoint of everyday reality.

Which brings us to this issue's cover. Consider, if you will, what wonders can be contained in a simple metal reel. If that's not a source of wonder in itself, what is?

- Dan Marcus

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# TRUMP'S DC TAKEOVER

ZACH BEAUCHAMP

Depending on who you listen to, President Donald Trump's decision to seize control over law enforcement in Washington, DC, is either an authoritarian menace or a farce.

The authoritarian menace case is straightforward: Trump is (again) asserting the power to deploy the National Guard to a major US city, while adding the new wrinkle of federalizing the local police force based on a wholly made-up emergency. He is, political scientist Barbara Walter warns, "building the machinery of repression before it's needed," getting the tools to violently shut down big protests "in place before the next election."

The farce case focuses less on these broad fears and more on the actual way it has played out. Instead of nabbing DC residents who oppose the president, federal agents appear to be aimlessly strolling the streets in safe touristy areas like Georgetown or the National Mall. During a pointless Sunday night deployment to the U Street corridor, a popular nightlife area, they faced down the terrifying threat of a drunk man throwing a sandwich.

"This ostensible show of strength is more like an admission of weakness," the Atlantic's Quinta Jurecic writes. "It is the behavior of a bully: very bad for the people it touches, but not a likely prelude to full authoritarian takeover."

So who's right? In a sense, both of them. Trump's show of force in DC is both cartoonish and ominous, farcical and dangerous.

It serves to normalize abuses of power that could very well be expanded — in fact, that Trump himself is openly promising to try it out in other cities. However, both the DC deployment and Trump's prior National Guard misadventure in Los Angeles show that it's actually quite hard to create effective tools of domestic repression. Executing on his threats requires a level of legal and tactical acumen that it's not obvious the Trump administration possesses.

Or, put differently: The power they're claiming

is scary in the abstract, but the way they're currently wielding it is too incompetent to do meaningful damage to democracy. The key question going forward — not just for DC, but the nation — is whether they get better with practice.

## The DC Crackdown Has Been Impotent So Far

Carl Schmitt, a reactionary German legal theorist who would later become a Nazi jurist, famously claimed that emergency powers create an insuperable problem for the liberal-democratic ideal of the rule of law. In theory, the law can limit how and when a person in government can wield emergency powers. But in practice, it all comes down to who has the power to give those words meaning.

Who says what an emergency is and when it ends? That person, and not the legal text or its underlying intent, is what determines what the law means — and thus has the real power.

Schmitt expressed this idea in a famous dictum: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception." And while Trump has surely never heard of Schmitt, let alone read him, this is basically the way his administration has operated. On issues ranging from trade to federalizing DC law enforcement, Trump has decided that ordinary problems — job losses from trade, crime — are emergencies that justify him invoking powers designed for times of war, natural disaster, or rebellion. And so far, he's mostly gotten away with it.

His federalization of DC will test the limits of Trump's Schmittian approach. By law, Trump's emergency power only allows him to federalize control over city police — the Metropolitan Police Department, or MPD — for 30 days. And federal agents, be they National Guard or the DEA or Homeland Security, have circumscribed legal responsibilities and personnel limitations that prevent them from fully replacing the

MPD as ultimate authority in the capital city.

This is the first thing to watch in DC: Will Trump go full Schmitt, and simply declare that these constraints on his power are moot? And if so, who — if anyone — will try and stop him?

It's important to emphasize that we don't know the answers to these questions. While Trump has claimed the power to maintain federal control over the MPD beyond the 30-day limit, Trump is constantly claiming all sorts of things that aren't true. It is entirely possible that, next month, the MPD reverts to local control with

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— Zach Beauchamp

basically no long-term ill effects.

But even if Trump does defy a court order to release the MPD back to DC or otherwise maintain some kind of long-term federal presence on the streets of DC, there's a question of what exactly he is accomplishing.

Here, we have to separate damage to democracy from other concrete harms. Trump's crackdown may already be producing unjust arrests of many unhoused people in DC. That is bad and worthy of condemnation.

Such arrests do not, however, help Trump consolidate the kind of controls a would-be dictator wants from law enforcement: the ability to suppress critical speech and opposition political activity through force of arms. The mere fact that federal troops are on the street, or that the MPD is technically under federal control, does not mean that they're arresting Democrats or raiding the Washington Post or opening fire on protesters.

Of course, the fact that something isn't yet happening doesn't mean it won't. But the current deployments, for all their fascist aesthetics, are quite far from that — in fact, they appear to be doing a lot of impotent, haphazard traffic stops. In the U Street area, home to mixed populations of longtime residents and more recent gentrifiers, locals have confronted the cops and jeered at them — with no reports of serious retaliatory injury. Trump is doing something that has an authoritarian intent and appearance that galvanizes resistance, without any kind of plan for turning it into an effective repressive tool.

One could tell a similar story about the National Guard deployment to LA. Back then, Trump sent in the troops with a big show, claiming they were necessary to get (overhyped) riots under control. In reality, they showed up and went on a few drug and immigration raids, and then almost all of them quietly slinked off without scaring the LA population into political submission. Courts are currently hearing arguments on the deployment's legality.

**Ad Hoc Authoritarianism**

None of this is to say that Trump's deployments are harmless. As Walter points out, he is creating legal




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and political precedents that could — at least in theory — be used toward repressive ends if they so desire. If Trump does something to mess with the fairness of the midterm elections and large cities erupt with protest, he’s already somewhat normalized a militarized response.

From a health-of-democracy standpoint, then, what’s worrying about recent events in DC is not the developments on the ground. It’s the precedent they set — the powers Trump is claiming that could be all too easily abused. The question is whether such abuse will occur.

So far, there is very little evidence that the Trump administration has anything like a systematic plan for suborning American democracy. He isn’t doing what someone like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán did in 2010 — come in with a blueprint for destroying the political opposition and executing on it as efficiently as possible.

Rather, he’s simply asserting powers whenever it’s convenient to do what he wants to do at the moment. Can’t get Congress to raise tariffs? Use emergency powers to impose them. Want to impose an unconstitutional export tax on Nvidia? Just make an extortionate “deal” with its CEO. Want to stop seeing images of protesters with Mexican flags in LA? Send in the National Guard.

To be clear: This ad hoc authoritarianism is still dangerous. It’s just comparatively less effective than its deliberate cousin. Trump hasn’t silenced the Democratic

opposition or the American press or shuttered civil rights groups. He’s taken steps in all of those directions, but they fit the ad hoc pattern: each troubling, but not (yet!) systematic or successful enough to fundamentally compromise the fairness of elections or Americans’ rights to dissent and free speech.

Where we’re at, in short, is a place where the building blocks for constructing an authoritarian state are all in a row. The question is whether Trump has the will and the vision to put them together in a way that could durably compromise the viability of American democracy.

This context helps us understand why the DC deployment is both absurd and dangerous.

It is absurd in the sense that it does nothing on its own to advance an authoritarian agenda — and, if anything, compromises it by creating images of uniformed thugs on American streets that galvanize his opponents. It is dangerous in that it could normalize abuses of power that, down the line, could be wielded as part of an actually serious campaign of repression.

And at this point, I don’t know which scenario is more likely: that Trump’s ad hoc efforts to seize control founder and ultimately amount to little, or that he follows his Schmittian logic to its dictatorial terminus.

Zach Beauchamp writes for *Vox* and other publications.

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# IF INDIANA JONES COULD PAINT

DAN MARCUS

As a child attending elementary school in Philadelphia, I learned about James Audubon, an adopted son of Pennsylvania world-famous for his paintings of birds. As with most of my social studies classes back then, the teacher merely skimmed the surface, bending over backward to make a fascinating history as boring as arithmetic. My only reference point to the subject as I tried to keep awake was the kind of birdwatcher I'd seen from time to time on TV—a man concealed behind a clump of bushes peering through a pair of binoculars.

Later in life, I was astonished to discover how wrong my childhood impression had been. Here's the story as it should have been taught:

John James Audubon was born in 1785 on a plantation in what is now Haiti, the bastard son of a French sea captain and a scullery cook. Raised by a chambermaid, he was often left to run wild in the hills. Brought to France at the age of six to escape the violence of the growing slave rebellion, he was raised as a gentleman and tutored in the arts of swordsmanship, marksmanship, music, hunting, and dance. At age eighteen, to avoid being drafted into Napoleon's army, he was sent to an estate owned by his father in Mill Grove, just outside of Philadelphia; contained on its vast grounds were livestock, arable land, a lead mine, and a lumber and grist mill. It was there that he met his future wife and soul mate, Lucy, the fetching daughter of a neighbor.

Having shown little interest in running an estate, young John headed west like so many restless spirits in those early days of the republic. He sold his share of the farm and—with Lucy and a business partner—traveled overland to the soot-covered city of Pittsburgh, then by flatboat down the Ohio River. They went ashore when they reached the new boomtown of Louisville, Kentucky, and opened a general store.

Besides being a loving wife, Lucy proved to be a good sport—she tolerated Audubon's tendency to disappear for days, weeks, and months at a time. He would venture out into an unexplored wilderness teeming with plants and wildlife the likes of which few



*James Audubon*

white people had ever seen. While pursuing his passion for exploring nature, Audubon was simultaneously

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— Dan Marcus

cultivating his ability to draw and paint it. His subject of choice: birds, in all their majesty and variety.

Visual representations of birds up to that point typically possessed a sterile and lifeless quality. Because these particular subjects were not inclined to sit still for a portrait, they invariably had to be killed before the artist could proceed with his work. Though faced with the same limitation, Audubon wished to present the creatures as they were in life.

After a series of experiments, he developed a technique of mounting his specimens on a board with wire, which allowed him to stage lifelike scenes of birds in action—flying, feeding, interacting, or attacking prey. And unlike other artists,

Audubon portrayed them in their natural surroundings. To top it off, his paintings were always life-size and perfectly proportioned thanks to the ingenious innovation of posing his subjects against a grid.

When, not surprisingly, the Louisville store failed—along with other hapless and sundry attempts to earn an honest living—Audubon came to believe that painting birds was his true calling. Portfolio in hand, he journeyed to Philadelphia, the commercial and cultural center of American civilization at that time. But despite an initial spurt of enthusiasm, he was soon dismissed as an amateur and an unkempt hick by members of the prestigious Academy of Natural Sciences. His lively,

sometimes violent portrayals of avian life were viewed as extravagant and inappropriate, especially when compared with the decorous, formalistic representations that were then prevalent.

Audubon also offended the Academy's sensibilities by letting his ego and imagination run away with him. Though his real-life escapades were nothing if not colorful, he couldn't resist the urge to embellish them, resorting at times to outright fabrication. In that regard he occupies a space in the time-honored lineage of American storytellers and self-mythologizers that extends from Andrew Jackson to Davy Crockett to Wyatt Earp.

Audubon drove the final nail into the coffin of his reputation when he foolishly denigrated his chief counterpart in the discovery and depiction of bird species, Alexander Wilson. While Wilson's work consisted of flat, scaled-down versions of what Audubon captured on paper, he was widely regarded as the standard-bearer in the still developing field of naturalist painting.

Audubon found himself at low ebb as he approached the age of forty—rejected by the powers that be, one step away from debtors' prison, his beloved wife a world away in the bayous of Louisiana with their two sons, and two daughters deceased. Assessing his prospects in America as moribund following the Philadelphia debacle, he knew he had to take his leave once again, this time to cross an ocean.

Armed with letters of introduction from several sympathetic members of the Academy, he set sail for Liverpool; he knew this would be his last hurrah. As he crossed the Atlantic through calm seas and raging storms, he could not have imagined the degree to which his fast-fading dreams were about to be realized.

Audubon's success in Liverpool was meteoric and nearly instantaneous—the reverse image of his rejection in Philadelphia. There he was viewed—not as a pretender—but as an irascible genius, a larger-than-life rustic gentleman with a groundbreaking portfolio unlike anything the world had ever seen. And his exaggerated tales of adventure were regarded, not with disdain, but with wonder and fascination. In modern parlance, the British “got” the man and his work:



*Indiana Jones*



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the magnificent artistry, the color-drenched paintings of birds at full scale, the exquisite detail, and most strikingly, the sheer drama of it all—as in his rendering of two mockingbirds attacking an angry rattlesnake. He finally had the world by a tail feather and never let it go.

Explorer, gun-toting adventurer, and champion of wildlife, John James Audubon was clearly not the figure I pictured in elementary school—an effete nature lover sporting a pair of binoculars and a sketch pad. With 2023's *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* presumably the titular hero's swan song, I cast my vote for a new film franchise to replace the intrepid archeologist with a trailblazing painter of birds. George Lucas, please take note.

Dan Marcus is the curator of the Dan Marcus Gallery (YouTube) and the creator of the scores for six stage musicals produced in Los Angeles and the Philippines.

# CALIFORNIA'S FILM TAX INCENTIVE EXPANDS TO \$750M IN 2025

J O S E P H C H I A N E S E

**A**s global production competition grows, U.S. states are ramping up their efforts to keep film and TV projects from relocating overseas, and California has made moves to reinstate itself as a major contender in the Hollywood arms race.

The Golden State took a historic step forward on June 27, 2025, when Governor Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill 132, which expanded the Film & Television Tax Credit Program (also known as Program 4.0) to \$750 million annually for five years. This new legislation went into effect July 1, 2025. Assembly Bill 1138 – the companion Bill to 132 – which also included significant improvements to the California Film & TV Tax Credit Program, passed shortly thereafter, and was signed into law by Newsom on July 3, 2025.

Under the California 4.0 incentive program, qualified productions can now receive a 35-40% refundable incentive back between 2025-2030. In addition, eligibility is broadened to cover projects such as animated films and series, large-scale competition shows, and TV shows with episodes of less than 30 minutes. Applicants are also eligible to elect to treat the California Tax Credit as a Refundable Tax Credit.

While the expanded incentives in California offer a promising path to reclaiming productions lost to international competitors, like Canada and the UK, and to states like New Jersey and Georgia, key gaps remain. Most notably, gaps remain in the exclusion of above-the-line (ATL) costs and standalone incentives for VFX or post-production services if the project is not filmed entirely in California.

According to the California Film Commission, Program 4.0 is estimated to increase jobs by 40-50% (resulting in an estimated increase of around 4,400-5,500 new industry jobs). Although a hopeful number, some disagree that the 17,000 jobs lost since 2022 are recoverable or that the program is enough to bring

California's film business back to what it once was a decade ago.

Still, California is back in the running in a three-way race with New York and New Jersey to reclaim production in the U.S. That is, after Georgia, which still takes the lead, offering an unlimited cap for tax incentives including ATL costs.

The question remains: Is the considerable expansion of the incentive enough to make a difference, or is the damage already done?

## Details on California's New Incentive Program

While California's Incentive Program 4.0 provides double the amount of funding compared to its predecessor programs, it's not a free-for-all. The new incentive scheme comes with parameters to ensure that every project receiving funds provides the most economic value for the State of California.

- Narrow application windows are structured for each type of project. The first application window, for new, relocating, pilot, limited or recurring television series, ran from July 7 – 9, 2025.

- Once an application is submitted for a project during that time frame, the applicant must complete a "jobs ratio test" to show how many jobs that project is estimated to provide. The projects that demonstrate they are going to create or maintain the highest percentage of jobs in the State are more likely to be selected.

- The program also holds applicants accountable for realistic forecasting, which means that applicants will be penalized if they grossly over-estimate on job creation and then fail to meet those estimates.

Along with additional application windows (now limited to 3 days instead of 5 days) and the additional reporting requirements, California's Program 4.0 is a major step up

from the State's 3.0 program. In the face of mounting competition, California made significant updates to its tax credit offerings, betting that the risk will return a handsome reward.

## Here's How the Revamped Program 4.0 Breaks Down:

### 1. Expanded Funding Cap

The State's film tax credit program will see its cap increase by over 125%, soaring from \$330 million to \$750 million. This injection of funding ensures that more productions can take advantage of the program without

**The question remains: Is the considerable expansion of the incentive enough to make a difference, or is the damage already done?**

– Joseph Chianese



# ABOUT BEYOND BAROQUE

Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center is one of the nation's most successful and influential grassroots incubators of literary art. Founded in 1968 and housed in the original Venice City Hall building in Venice, California, it is a nonprofit public space dedicated to cultivating new writing and expanding the public's knowledge of poetry, fiction, literature, and art through cultural events and community interaction. The Center offers a diverse variety of literary and arts programming, including readings, workshops, art exhibits, and education. The Center also houses a bookstore with the largest collection of new poetry books on the west side of Los Angeles; the Mike Kelley Gallery, which specializes in text and language-focused visual art; and a 50,000 volume archive of small press and limited-edition publications that chronicles the history of poetry movements in Los Angeles and beyond.

Few literary spaces have done more to cultivate innovative art from cultural outsiders, or to shape emerging artistic movements. Across five decades Beyond Baroque has nurtured the Venice Beats, cradled the Los Angeles punk scene, and provided crucial support to a series of seminal experimental writers and artists that include Dennis Cooper, Wanda Coleman, Mike Kelley, and Will Alexander.

Its legendary free workshops have profoundly shaped Los Angeles literature by helping to launch a number of influential careers, including those of Kate Braverman, Tom Waits, Leland Hickman, Bob Flanagan, Eloise Klein Healy, David Trinidad, Jim Krusoe, Exene Cervenka, Amy Gerstler, Paul Vangelisti, Michael Ondaatje, Harry Northup, Brendan Constantine, Jenny Factor, and Sarah Maclay.

Its reading and performance series have exposed L.A. audiences to some of the world's most notable writers and artists, often at early stages in their careers, including Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Raymond Carver, X, Patti Smith, Viggo Mortensen, Paul Auster, Chris Kraus, Eileen Myles, Luis J. Rodriguez, Dana Gioia, Hector Tobar, David St. John, Robin Coste Lewis, and Maggie Nelson.

Today the Center continues to provide a vital cultural forum through its free workshops, reading series, youth programming, and artistic gatherings.

## **Beyond Baroque's Mission**

Beyond Baroque's mission is to encourage the writing, reading, publication, dissemination, and preservation of contemporary literature through programming, education, archiving, and services in literature and the arts.

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worrying about funding.

## 2. Increased Tax Credit Rates (35%-40%)

Qualified productions may now receive a base 35% refundable tax credit over the course of five years (up from the previous base of 20% to 25%). Additional increases of 2-5% for hiring from targeted job programs, relocating a project back to California, or filming outside the 30-mile radius of the Los Angeles studio zone are also available.

For example, TV series with a minimum of \$1M per episode and having filmed 75% of their show outside California and then relocate back to California during their first year of receiving a California film tax credit are eligible for a total 40% credit.

## 3. Broader Eligibility

The new 4.0 program allows more types of productions to qualify for the tax credits with a California expenditure of \$1M or more, including:

- Animation series and films, which have been excluded in the past
- Multi-camera sitcoms
- Large-scale competition shows, such as reality or game shows with production budgets over \$1 million
- TV shows less than 30 minutes

*Note: Reality, documentary programming, game, talk shows, as well as above-the-line labor expenditures are still excluded.*

## 4. Diversity and Inclusion Bonuses

A focus on diversity and inclusion is also built into the new California 4.0 incentive, with an additional credit of up to 2% for qualified productions that participate in the Career Pathways program and that employ 1-4 trainees from historically underserved communities.

These trainees must be hired in addition to, and not in place of, experienced union crew, safeguarding union jobs. Productions are also now required to report on the zip codes and veteran status of their workforce, in addition to existing requirements for race, ethnicity, and gender, to promote demographic and geographic inclusion.

## 5. Shift to Refundability

All applications on or after July 1, 2025, have the option to elect “refundability” for taxpayers with no California income tax or sales tax liability. This change was primarily introduced through Senate Bill 132 (Ch. 56, Stat. 2023) and was further reinforced by companion legislation like AB 1138.

*Note, if a project chooses “refundability,” it will receive only 90%, paid out over 5 years.*

Applicants who choose not to elect refundability can still use the California credit to offset their California income tax or sales tax liability. Independent producers (not publicly traded nor owned by more than 25% by a publicly traded company) are still eligible to sell California tax credit to other corporate or individual California taxpayers.

What hasn’t changed:

## 6. Above-the-Line (ATL) Costs Remain Excluded

Despite advocacy from groups like the California Production Coalition, ATL expenses, such as salaries for lead actors, directors, and producers, remain excluded from qualified expenditures. This limitation could weaken California’s appeal for high-budget or star-driven projects that may opt for the New York or Georgia incentive program instead, both of which cover ATL costs within their film credit programs.

## 7. Music-Scoring and Post-Production Not Included

Standalone music scoring, VFX and post-production services are still not recognized as eligible for expenses. The focus remains primarily on principal production activity. So, productions that film in places like Canada or Georgia and that decide to complete their VFX or post-production in California are not eligible for Program 4.0 incentives.

## Staying Competitive in a Changing Production Landscape

The push to enhance California’s incentives comes at a crucial time. As we saw in 2024, production filming fell by 40% compared to 2022, while countries like the UK and Canada saw steady growth in production spending. The global landscape for filming continues to shift, with filmmakers seeking out the most financially advantageous incentive programs.

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California's competitive push is essential for the State to remain a viable filming location, especially as other states like New York, New Jersey, and Georgia continue to revamp their incentive programs to attract large-scale productions.

The appeal of international locations also continues to grow. Canada saw production spending rise to \$5.41 billion in 2024, while the UK hit \$5.91 billion. These increases came as U.S. production shrank overall and destabilized California's longtime dominance in the global film industry.

This \$750 million expansion has now broadened the scope of California's incentives to stop this outflow of projects and reassert the State's leadership in entertainment production.

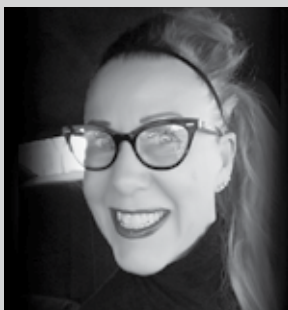


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# LIGHTS, LEGACY, AND LIBERATION: 25 QUESTIONS WITH KELLY LORRAINE MASON – FILMMAKER, ACTIVIST, AND VISIONARY CREATOR

B A S I L C A R N E Y

**1** Kelly, what first inspired you to step behind the camera?

I was inspired by the power of visual storytelling to heal, awaken, and ignite change. From a young age, I understood that cinema wasn't just entertainment—it was a medium to shift paradigms.

**2. You've worked across film, TV, and environmental activism. What unifies your work?**

Everything I do is rooted in service—to humanity, to the planet, to the soul's evolution. Whether I'm behind the camera or in front of government officials, my aim is impact with integrity.

**3. You were the first female cinematographer in the International Cinematographers Guild, Local 669. How did that shape your path?**

Breaking that barrier in 1995 taught me resilience. I didn't just hold the camera—I held the line for other women to follow.

**4. Your feature doc *Pave the Road* won global acclaim. What made it so personal?**

It wasn't just a film. It was a mission. My kids and I moved to Costa Rica, fought for legislation, and created an eco-solution that's now law. The film captured that miracle.

**5. Tell us about that law. What changed?**

In 2021, Costa Rica passed Law 9828, mandating recycled plastic in road construction—thanks to our video campaigns and partnerships with brands like Toyota. We turned waste into legacy.

**6. What's the throughline of your career?**

Conscious creation. I'm not here to entertain—I'm here to awaken. From red carpets to grassroots revolutions, my work weaves story with soul.

**7. You've mentored with giants like Lazlo Kovacs and Vilmos Zsigmond. How did that influence your aesthetic?**

They taught me that light is emotion. Every frame is a feeling. My style blends classic technique with intuitive vision.

**8. What's the most powerful compliment you've received on set?**

Jess Kardos from *Supergirl* told me, "Your frame moves me." That's everything. To be seen as a soulful storyteller in an industry of speed—it's rare and humbling.

**9. How do you balance intuition and precision as a director?**

Intuition chooses the frame. Precision delivers the take. It's a sacred marriage of listening and leading.

**10. You've produced projects for Apple, Toyota, CW, Netflix, Gaia, and more. How do you choose your projects now?**

It has to have purpose. I only say yes if the story elevates consciousness or leaves a legacy worth living.

**11. What does your typical day look like now?**

Morning kundalini, team calls, creative development, and either a shoot or healing session. I move between worlds—film, family and frequency.

**12. You're a member of the television academy and several cinematography guilds. Why is this important to you?**

Representation matters. I stand in these rooms so the next generation of visionary women and BIPOC creators feel they belong.

**13. What's the boldest career move you've made?**

Leaving Hollywood to raise my children in Costa Rica and becoming an environmental activist. It led to my life's most meaningful work.

**14. You've directed award-winning series and children's programming. What draws you to diverse formats?**

Each audience is sacred. Whether I'm speaking to a child or a policymaker, the heart remains the compass.

**Conscious  
creation.  
I'm not here to entertain—  
I'm here to  
awaken.  
From red carpets  
to grassroots revolutions,  
my work weaves  
story with soul.**

– Kelly Lorraine Mason

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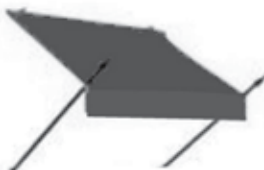
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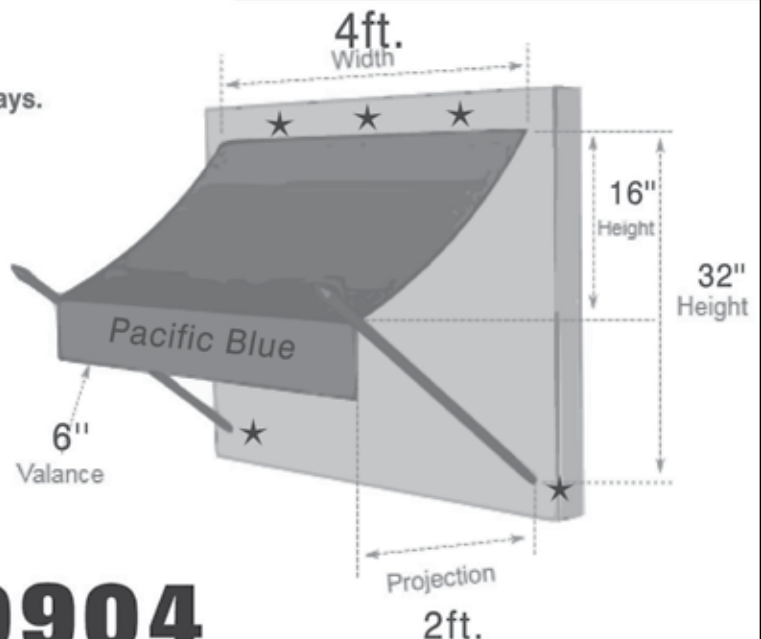
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**15. How do you approach storytelling now in the age of AI and content saturation?**

With reverence. Authenticity pierces through the noise. I still believe in the soul behind the lens.

**16. . Your docuseries *The Frequency of Miracles* sounds fascinating. What's its core message?**

That miracles are not rare—they're coded into our lives. When we shift our vibration, we shift our outcomes.

**17. You were once a fashion model. How did that past life inform your current one?**

Modeling taught me how to be seen. Directing taught me how to see others. Both require presence and poise.

**18. What's your proudest achievement to date?**

That my children know their mother as a warrior for truth. That *Pave the Road* changed a country's legislation. That I never gave up on love or light.

**19. You also run healing programs. How do they intersect with your filmmaking?**

Healing informs my lens. I can see the wound and the wisdom in a scene, in a person, in a nation. Film becomes ceremony.

**20. What is Kula Paradise Academy?**

It's the school I wished I had growing up. A place where students learn wealth consciousness, energy mastery, and soul purpose. It's where creators become leaders.

**21. What has been your most challenging moment as a woman in film?**

Being underestimated. But I turned that into fire. Now, I don't need permission—I make the table and I bring others with me.

**22. What makes a great cinematographer?**

Stillness, sensitivity, and stamina. You have to feel the story before you frame it.

**23. How do you measure success now?**

By freedom. By joy. By the lives transformed through my work.

**24. What's next for you?**

Developing *The Accidental Jesus*, expanding Kula Paradise, and executive producing films that feed the future. Legacy is my lens now.

**25. What would you tell your younger self?**

Trust your voice. Your light is not too much—it's medicine.

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# CONFESSIONS OF A SERIAL HIGH SCHOOL REUNION STALKER

J O H N O ' K A N E

A year ago, a classmate from high school whom I've kept in touch with over the years—let's call him Willie—wondered why people keep wanting reunions. As someone who's attended all of them, I pondered that question in the coming months. I couldn't imagine breaking the chain. But did this mean I was obsessed with attending? Obsession, of course, is a psychic snafu of sorts that circumvents positive instincts, trancing subjects to act beyond their awareness. Was I conditioned to stalk my high school reunions? And if so, why?

Perhaps I wanted to regress to teen life, gloat in the sensation of pubescent glee. After all, I'd never attended my college or graduate school reunions.

Maybe I was in a subconscious search for the equivalent of the lost chord, values that had forever escaped me since the moment when I was suspended for cutting classes to play pool.

It may be that I figured there'd be answers to questions I hadn't thought of. Why didn't I become a priest when I spent too much time imagining I'd become one? Why didn't I become an accountant after getting a degree? Perhaps I didn't feel comfortable in cathedrals of finance or forgiveness.

Conceivably I was curious to find out what paths the members of our class pursued. We grew up in a special moment in history when altruistic values reigned. And since our moniker was "Crusaders," we were expected to shape our lives with principled crusades, as our president orated in the auditorium one day after the chants for Herb the janitor subsided. I had to be hopeful that the maelstrom of changes in our midst didn't scramble the sensitivities of the potentially best and brightest of our class and breed too many Grand Inquisitors.

I must've had an itch to get answers to other questions I had difficulty formulating and felt a weekend

retreat might be a perfect way to spawn some clarity. A perfect way to perform a Catholic reunion. Everyone can spill their guts in a kind of collective confession, while suppressing, of course, some of the more incriminating sins.

Speaking of sin, that bugaboo flashing us from cradle to grave, I possibly wanted to purge mine in a welcoming space that would get me a just absolution and a proper penance. Absolution now offers iffy, relative resolutions to the moral quagmires of our time and risks sending us to one of Dante's more confining circles of hell, all because of a priest's misread of the Bible's fundamentals from spending too much time out of the box. Or, should I say, confession box?

(Flash: Perhaps I write to confess. It's probably a catharsis of sorts, a way to expiate my sins, pay for my misguided transgressions. My recent novel, after all, focuses on an imaginary high school reunion.)

Maybe I wanted to find out why I was attracted to one of the nuns and whether that was a mortal sin.

Harboring this possibility for years might've melted my moral compass. Sister Alice? She must've seeded desires that would eventually surface and demand fruition. As I discovered later, through a friend who escaped the convent after ten years, nuns who break free from spiritual bondage become acute visionaries.

Perhaps I wanted to finally face my fears with a dose of geriatric juice, get at their source and quash them. The sense of an ending, the moment when my number might be up, had to nettle my nerve endings when the final notice appeared in my inbox. But immersing myself in this experience, ogling clear-eyed at fate, could create a new freedom and allow me to sidestep the Reaper's trajectory.

Conceivably I'd be facing up to the possibly of having wronged someone, wondering who they might be as

I humbly circulated through a mostly unfamiliar crowd. That face! It's so familiar but I can't connect it to any semblance of a story. I cringe as I keep staring, the face like a flashing neon sign that beckons me in the middle of the night. Relax my nameless classmate, I apologize. I will eventually recall who you are.

Maybe I'd be coming to terms at last with my pubescent dating traumas. The sleepover that brought on hypersomnia. The onset of a serious case of amnesia that prevented me from picking up my date for the prom.

**Maybe I was in  
a subconscious  
search for the equivalent  
of the lost chord,  
values that had forever  
escaped me  
since the moment  
when I was  
suspended  
for cutting classes  
to play pool.**

— John O'Kane

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Speaking of dating, I had to wonder how those priests and nuns fared in the decade when all sorts of substances and values were transubstantiating. The Monday morning when the priest in our social studies class announced that he and Sister Rosanna got married over the weekend petrified my dendrites, leaving me in spiritual chaos for several weeks.

In the following weeks, I tried to work out these conundrums in my night dreams and daydreams as I pondered whether to attend. I even thought about seeing a Confessor since a sin had to be in there somewhere. Shunting that aside, I finally consulted a seer. She was trained in existential psychology but had recently turned to the Tarot to spoon up some sensitivities about the social psyche ignored by the mind that insists that two plus two equals four is always correct. Initially, she suggested that I might be saddled with Catholic guilt and be reduced to a prattling professor, perpetually incapable of spouting worthy phrases or even recalling what I'd done. But when I didn't pick the death card, she said I should go and see what's happening. The reunion might fine-tune my memory, even buffer the onset of dementia, thereby keeping my identity up for grabs.

I was well-advised. The experience did regenerate my life force a bit, pushing my exit date further down the road...at least in my imagination. And nothing unexpected occurred, except for the moment a new cousin popped up next to the hors d'oeuvres table.

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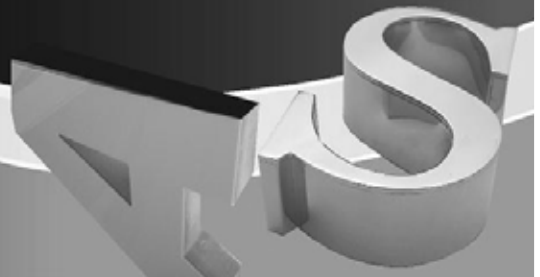
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# THE GENIUS ACT AND THE NATIONAL BANK ACTS

E L L E N B R O W N

**T**his past month Congress passed the GENIUS Act, an acronym for the “Guiding and Establishing National Innovation for U.S. Stablecoins of 2025.” Designed to regulate stablecoins, a category of cryptocurrency designed to maintain a stable value, the act is highly controversial.

Critics variously argue that it anoints stablecoins as the equivalent of “programmable” central bank digital currencies (CBDCs), that it lacks strong consumer protections, and that government centralization destroys the independence of the cryptocurrency market.

Proponents say the rapidly expanding stablecoin market not only provides a faster and cheaper payments system but can serve as a major funding source to help alleviate the federal debt crisis, which is poised to destroy the economy if not checked, and that the stablecoin market has gotten so large that, without regulation, they may have to bail it out when it becomes a multitrillion dollar industry that is “too big to fail.”

For most people, however, the whole subject of stablecoins is a mystery, so this article will attempt to throw some light on it. It will also explore some historical use cases demonstrating how the government might incorporate stablecoins into a broader program for escaping the debt crisis altogether.

## Stablecoin Mania

The cryptocurrency craze began with Bitcoin in 2008.

Conceived as a decentralized alternative to government-issued currency, Bitcoin uses blockchain technology — a transparent, tamper-resistant ledger that all users can view and verify — to facilitate peer-to-peer transactions without relying on banks or payment intermediaries. But to be widely accepted, a currency must have a stable value, and Bitcoin’s value has vacillated wildly. Stablecoins were devised to solve that problem. They are cryptocurrencies that are backed by safe assets (e.g., short-term U.S. Treasuries). Supposedly, holders of stablecoins can redeem the coins at par and at will for cash, just like demand deposits and money market funds.

Stablecoin use has exploded in recent years. As

of March 2025, their total market capitalization reached \$232 billion, a 45-fold increase since December 2019. Projections suggest this figure could hit \$400 billion by year-end and as much as \$2.8 trillion by 2028. Stablecoins Tether (USDT) and USD Coin (USDC) dominate the market, holding 86% of it. In 2024, stablecoins processed \$27.6 trillion in transfer volume (the total value of stablecoin transactions recorded on blockchains), surpassing the combined volume of Visa and Mastercard. Daily volumes could hit \$300 billion in 2025.

Stablecoins are said to be transforming cross-border payments, remittances and DeFi (decentralized finance). They offer faster, cheaper transactions and are used in 71% of cross-border payments in Latin America. In crypto markets, stablecoins account for 60–80% of trading volume on major exchanges. Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa lead retail and professional-sized stablecoin transfers, with over 40% year-over-year growth. Major banks and fintechs are also integrating stablecoins or have started stablecoin initiatives, including Bank of America, Wells Fargo, Stripe,

JPMorgan, PayPal and Société Générale.

Despite their name, however, stablecoins are not entirely stable. They have faced liquidity crises and transparency issues and are vulnerable to runs. Hence the need for regulation. The GENIUS Act of 2025, signed July 18, 2025, requires stablecoin issuers to be banks or approved nonbanks, to maintain 1:1 reserves in safe assets (e.g., U.S. Treasuries, cash) that are audited monthly, and to comply with KYC (Know Your Customer) and AML (Anti-Money Laundering) rules.

## The “Backdoor CBDC” Issue

Was the intent of the act to create a “backdoor CBDC”? The concern of critical commentators is with privacy and “programmability” — the ability of the issuer to program a digital currency in order to control or block its use.

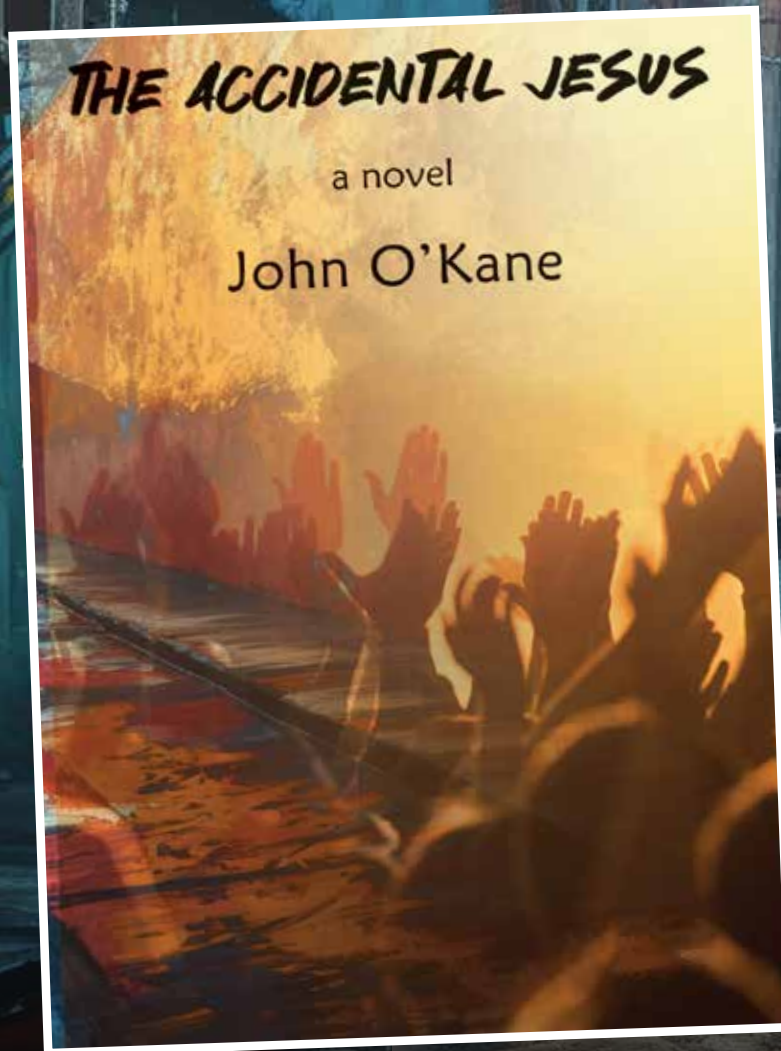
Skeptics of the backdoor CBDCs theory note that President Trump signed an executive order banning CBDCs in January, citing privacy and economic stability concerns, and that stablecoins are not centrally issued but have many private issuers globally. Any digital currency is “programmable” unless specifically protected against it, and most of our currency is already digital, created on the ledgers of banks when they make loans.

It has been argued that programming the use of deposits could actually be done more easily with our existing network of banks than with globally scattered

**For most people,  
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is a mystery,  
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will attempt to throw  
some light on it**

– Ellen Brown

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stablecoin issuers, just by sending the banks orders in automated messages by API. (An API, or “application programming interface,” is “a set of rules or protocols that enables software applications to communicate with each other to exchange data, features and functionality.”) In a July 22 Substack post titled “Has Brazil Invented the Future of Money?”, former New York Times columnist Paul Krugman writes:

“The government can access private bank records under certain circumstances and certainly has the technological ability to watch every financial move you make. The only thing that keeps it from doing so is the law, specifically the Right to Financial Privacy Act. If we ever do create a CBDC, it will surely involve comparable privacy protection.”

Krugman suggests that it is really the banks that are afraid of CBDCs, because people will withdraw their funds from their private bank accounts in favor of their central bank accounts, cutting out the banker middlemen and their much higher fees. He points to Brazil, which has a CBDC-like system called Pix – a sort of publicly-run Zelle in which transactions settle in three seconds on average, versus two days for debit cards and 28 days for credit cards. The Brazilian authorities have set a requirement that Pix be free for individuals. It is used by 93% of Brazilian adults, compared to a mere 2% of Americans using cryptocurrencies for trade.

Financial commentator Mark Goodwin contended in a recent interview on the Corbett Report that a programmable currency issued by a private stablecoin company could actually be more dangerous than a CBDC. Some of these companies aren’t even domiciled in the United States, and they are not subject to Federal Reserve control. In a July 26th podcast, macroeconomic historian Miles Harris explained that risk like this:

“In the GENIUS era, private stablecoin issuers function as offshore central banks. Liquidity creation occurs outside the Fed’s control, but the underlying collateral—U.S. debt—remains on public books. This creates a governance gap: *liquidity is generated by private actors driven by profit, not monetary stability, yet systemic risk returns to the public sector if things unravel.* During the Bretton Woods era, confidence in the dollar was theoretically anchored to gold. Today, no such backstop exists. The Anti-CBDC Act prohibits the Federal Reserve from issuing a central bank digital currency (CBDC), leaving no public digital dollar to counterbalance private stablecoins.”

To explain all that might take another article, but in any case the GENIUS Act has passed and is a done deal. Whether or not we approve, we now need to consider its ramifications. Its main purpose seems to be to salvage the federal bond market, which is in perilous straits.

### Propping Up the Bond Market and the Dollar

The rapidly expanding stablecoin market is projected to be able to fill the void left by disenchanted governments that are dumping Treasuries and

“dedollarizing” in response to Western sanctions and U.S. tariffs. According to Senator Bill Hagerty (R-TN), who sponsored the GENIUS Act, it could lead to stablecoin issuers becoming the “world’s largest holders of U.S. Treasuries by 2030.”

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent says stablecoins are a strategic tool to “lock in dollar supremacy.” As financial commentator Lyn Alden observes, when residents of countries with unstable currencies (such as Argentina) purchase U.S. stablecoins to protect their savings from runaway inflation, the stablecoin issuer uses the local currency of the purchaser to buy U.S. Treasuries. In effect, the local currency has been converted to U.S. currency. That is also true for other institutional uses of stablecoins.

The problem with privately-issued money, however, is that untrustworthy issuers are subject to destabilizing bank runs; and that has been true for centuries. Gaining the confidence of users requires regulation to establish the stability and liquidity of the stablecoins, and hence the need for the GENIUS Act.

### How Lincoln Solved His Debt Crisis

In a 2023 research paper titled “Taming Wildcat Stablecoins,” Professors Gary B. Gorton and Jeffery Y. Zhang compared stablecoin issuers to the private “wildcat banks” that issued their own paper currencies as banknotes during the Free Banking Era before the Civil War. Private state-chartered banks issued their own paper banknotes, which were thinly capitalized and of uncertain reliability and exchangeability. Bank runs were common. The problem was solved through the National Bank Acts of 1863 and 1864.

The acts sought to stabilize a very chaotic system of private currencies by encouraging banks to acquire national bank charters that would allow them to issue a uniform national bank currency. To ensure its uniformity and stability, the banks were required to back their National Bank Notes one to one with federal bonds or precious metal coins deposited with the U.S. Treasury. This pool of liquidity — the forerunner of today’s central bank “reserves” — not only stabilized the currency against runs but helped fund the war effort and created a market for federal debt.

It helped, but the bonds purchased by the banks were not sufficient to fund the government’s needs. British-backed bankers were demanding 24–36% interest on loans — usurious terms that risked “recolonizing” the U.S. through debt. President Lincoln avoided that crippling debt by reverting to the funding mechanism of the American colonists – government-issued paper money. Under the Legal Tender Act of 1862, the Treasury issued \$450 million in U.S. Notes or Greenbacks — fiat currency spent directly into the economy for soldiers, supplies and contracts.

These innovations allowed Lincoln’s government to bypass foreign lenders, fund the Civil War, and preserve the country from colonization by debt. A similar approach could arguably solve the government’s debt



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crisis today.

**Fast Forward to 2025**

The United States now grapples with a \$36.72 trillion federal debt and an interest burden projected to be \$952 billion for 2025, consuming 18.4% of federal revenues. The debt to GDP ratio is an unsustainable 124%. Neither raising taxes nor slashing the federal budget will solve what is essentially a math problem: the debt-at-interest is growing faster than the economy itself.

The GENIUS Act, requiring stablecoins to be backed by U.S. Treasuries, follows the same funding model as the National Bank Acts, and it has the same limitations as a funding model. Stablecoins can bolster the market for U.S. debt, but they won't tame the voracious interest monster that is consuming the federal budget. President Lincoln largely met his funding crisis with currency issued directly by the Treasury, and President Trump could do the same.

This would have to be done, however, through the Treasury, not the Federal Reserve. The Fed can only issue "bank reserves" and is not allowed to fund the federal debt by buying Treasuries directly from the government. It must buy them on the open market, with reserves injected into the reserve accounts of the banks of the sellers. The banks then credit the sellers' deposit accounts with dollars, but the dollars go to the sellers, not to the Treasury; and the interest on the bonds goes to the banks, due to the Fed's controversial policy of paying interest on the banks' reserves.

Today, this interest paid to the banks is actually greater than the interest the Fed earns on the bonds it buys from them, resulting in a negative balance in its portfolio. In a recent interview on Fox News Business, Treasury Secretary Bessent said the Fed was "losing \$1 billion a year because of a mismatch in the bond portfolio from the short-term rates." In 2023, this loss amounted to \$114 billion; and it actually accrues to the Treasury, since the Fed is required to rebate its profits to the Treasury after deducting its costs. The Fed has now amassed a negative balance that will take years to pay off.

Thus, Federal Reserve purchases of federal securities through "quantitative easing" won't solve the debt problem. Treasury-issued currency, on the other hand, is legal and constitutional, as established by Lincoln's Greenbacks and the subsequent legal tender cases of the Supreme Court; and it could actually solve the debt crisis.

Dealing with the inflation question by printing the whole \$37 trillion needed to pay off the federal debt would no doubt be inflationary, and Congress would consider it a bridge too far in any case. But the Treasury could print enough to cover the interest on the debt, or to buy the debt as it comes due, or to cover the budget deficit.

The risk, of course, is that an out-of-control Congress will run the presses as a "magic money tree" to fund all of its pet projects. But limits could be put on these expenditures. They could be required to be

"productive," adding to GDP, lowering the debt to GDP ratio to manageable levels. The German government did this in the 1930s with Mefo bills, avoiding speculative exploitation of the funds by issuing them as payment for specific industrial output.

The People's Bank of China has hugely increased the money supply of that country without creating price inflation. Prices have been kept stable by increasing supply (GDP) along with demand (money). Increasing the country's GDP has been facilitated by China Development Bank, the world's largest development bank, which has funded massive infrastructure and development across the country.

HR 4052, The National Infrastructure Bank Act of 2023, is currently before Congress and has 48 co-sponsors. Like the Reconstruction Finance Corporation that pulled the U.S. economy out of the Great Depression, the bank is designed to be a source of off-budget financing, without adding new costs to the federal budget. It follows the model of the First U.S. Bank established by Alexander Hamilton. Capitalization is to be with debt-for-equity swaps: Treasuries held by the public will be traded for shares in the bank, paying 2% over the interest earned on the Treasuries. For more information, see the Coalition for a National Infrastructure Bank's website.

At the local level, state-owned banks could do something similar. Currently our only state-owned bank is the Bank of North Dakota, but it is a very successful model that not only funds state infrastructure and development but generates income for the state and acts as a "mini-Fed" for local banks. For more information, see the Public Banking Institute website.

The GENIUS Act can stabilize the bond market, but it is only a stopgap measure, buying time in the battle against an ever-growing debt. To escape altogether, as Lincoln's government did, Congress needs to issue some of its own "sovereign" money. If issued for productive purposes in a sustainable way, this money could arguably fuel the economy without reliance on federal debt markets at all.

Ellen Brown is an attorney, founder of the Public Banking Institute, and author of thirteen books including *Web of Debt*, *The Public Bank Solution*, and *Banking on the People: Democratizing Money in the Digital Age*. Her 400+ blog articles are posted at [EllenBrown.com](http://EllenBrown.com).



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# KEEPING FILM PRODUCTION WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

DAN MARCUS

Governor Gavin Newsom recently announced forty-eight new films to be shot in California under the state's Film and Television Tax Credit Program. In addition, he proposed to double down on the program by expanding the tax credit from \$330 million to \$750 million in order to further boost production in California.

"California didn't earn its role as the heart of the entertainment world by accident," he recently stated. "It was built over generations by skilled workers and creative talent pushing boundaries. Today's awards help ensure that this legacy lives on, keeping cameras rolling here at home, supporting thousands of crew members behind the scenes, and boosting local economies that depend on a strong film and television industry."

This diverse slate of feature films is expected to generate \$664 million in total spending throughout the state, including \$485 million in qualified expenditures and more than \$302 million in wages for California workers.

These projects, which include 43 independent films, are collectively expected to hire 6,515 cast and crew members, as well as 32,000 background performers (measured in accordance with the number of days utilized) across 1,346 total California filming days.

More than half of the films will be shot in the Los Angeles area, helping to support the community as it recovers from recent wildfires. Twenty-two of the selected projects will conduct

significant filming outside the Los Angeles area, contributing 329 out-of-zone filming days and substantial economic benefit to a broad range of organizations in Ventura County (Make A Wish, The Teller, Things We Cannot Touch), San Francisco and the Bay Area (High Priestess of Souls, Our Kind of Cruelty), El Dorado and Placer Counties (Gold Mountain), San Bernardino and Riverside Counties (Superbloom, The Heidi Fleiss Story), Bakersfield in Kern County (Counting by 7s), and coastal communities such as Half Moon Bay and Costa Mesa

**This diverse slate  
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in qualified expenditures  
and more than  
\$302 million  
in wages  
for California workers.**

— Dan Marcus

(Sponsor, Doll). Today's slate of awards marks the ninth allocation in this fiscal year and reinforces California's continued leadership as a global production hub, even as other states and countries pursue projects by providing their own incentives.

Here's how Colleen Bell, Director of the California Film Commission, characterized the mission: "This industry is core to California's creative economy and keeping production here at home is more important than ever. This round of tax credits shows our commitment

to supporting both indie and studio productions while spreading the economic benefits of filming across the state."

Productions recently awarded include the following:

- Six independently produced features with budgets over \$10 million, such as *Gold Mountain*, *The Teller*, and *They Follow*, all of which plan to film primarily outside of the Los Angeles area.

- Thirty-seven independent projects with budgets of \$10 million or less, contributing to the state's goal of expanding access to underrepresented filmmakers and promoting more inclusive storytelling.
- Five major studio features, including Sony Pictures' *One of Them Days* sequel—the latest film produced by Issa Rae — which alone is projected to spend more than \$39 million in qualified expenditures.

Nicole Brown, President of TriStar Pictures, stated the following: "Los Angeles was an essential backdrop to *One of Them Days* and we are thrilled that Dreux and Alyssa will embark on another authentic escapade through the city's streets in the sequel through the support of California's Film and Television Tax Credit."

The creative economy has deep roots in California's history and as one of the strategic sectors

outlined in the recently launched California Jobs First Economic Blueprint continues to be an engine for innovation, cultural expression, and economic growth.

- In 2023, California was home to 220,000 creative economy jobs, which amount to one out of every four such jobs in the U.S.

- The average salary paid to creative workers in 2023 was \$160,000, more than 50 percent higher than the California average.

- While the Los Angeles region leads the way in jobs

generated by the creative economy, three other regions — Redwoods, the Bay Area, and the Southern Border — also identified film, TV, and the arts in general as a regional strategic sector.

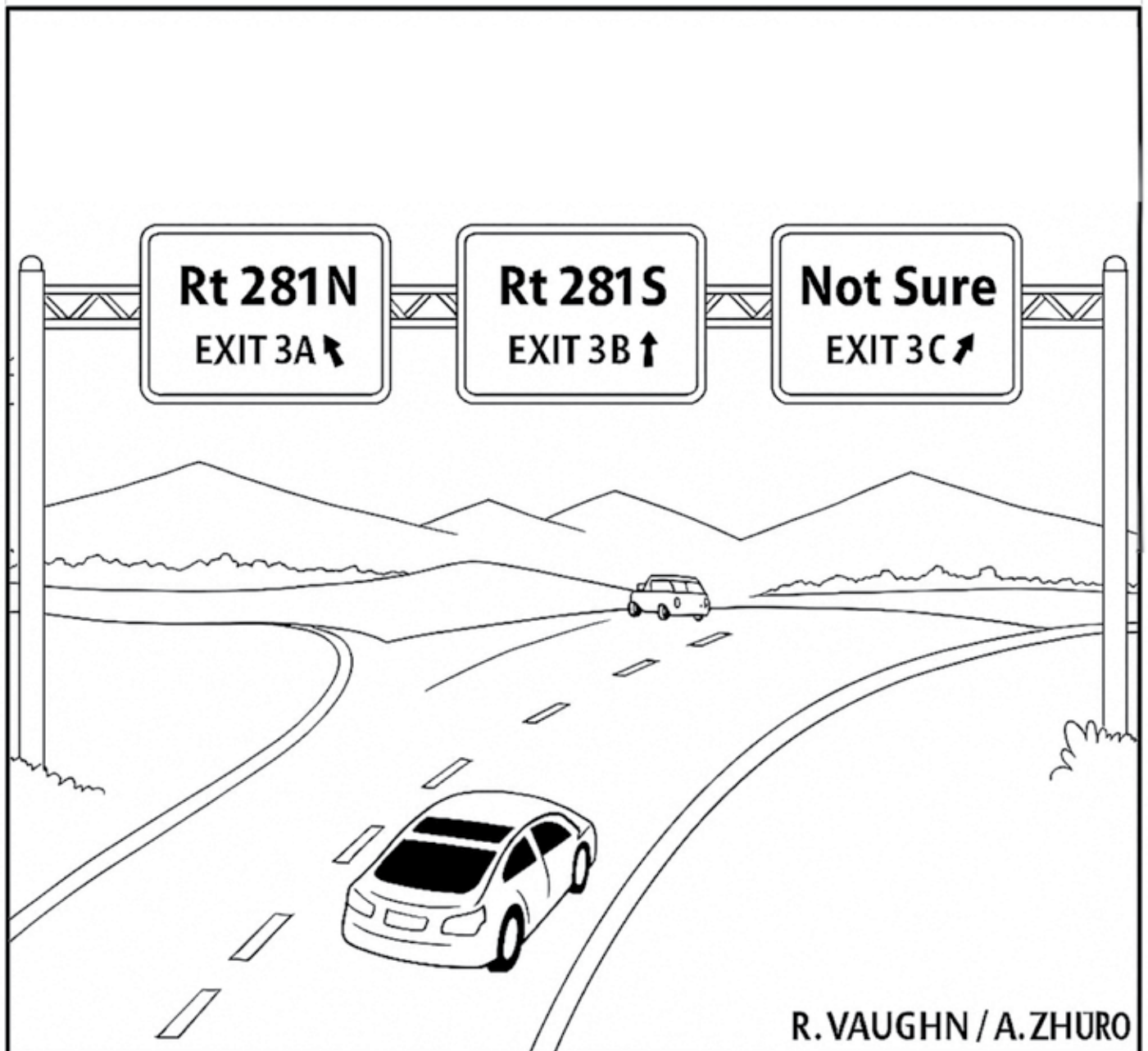
Since its launch in 2009 through May 2025, the Film and Television Tax Credit Program has approved 799 projects that have generated nearly \$27 billion in economic activity, resulting in less

runaway production, new career pathways for below-the-line workers, and increased economic opportunity in rural, suburban, and urban communities alike. The program further incentivizes projects that film outside the Los Angeles area or relocate to California from out-of-state. At the same time, it requires awarded projects to invest in career exposure and training opportunities for underrepresented communities.

Looking ahead, the next television application window is slated for July 7-9, 2025. Film applications will be accepted August 25-27, 2025. Application dates and deadlines are posted on the California Film Commission website.

Dan Marcus is a songwriter, playwright, and curator of the Dan Marcus Gallery (YouTube).

## THE WORLD ACCORDING TO VAUGHN



**EXCAVATING  
TENDERNESS:  
JEFFREY BRYANT'S  
THE CATACOMBS  
OF VANISHED  
LOVERS**

RICHARD MODIANO

In *The Catacombs of Vanished Lovers*, Jeffrey Bryant offers a meditative descent into the chambers of memory and desire, guided by a voice both precise and haunted. The first offering of Cherry Pie Press, the collection affirms Bryant's place among the quietly transformative voices in contemporary American poetry. (@thecherrypiepress, thecherrypiepress@gmail.com)

These poems are carved from the strata of love and loss, each one a reliquary of feeling—sometimes tender, sometimes brutal, always honest. Bryant navigates the corridors of emotional aftermath with the care of an archaeologist and the insight of a survivor. Yet what distinguishes this collection is not its sorrow, but its clarity. There is no excess, no indulgence—just the luminous wreckage of intimacy, laid bare and

made beautiful.

Bryant's language is refined yet visceral. Lines like "we slept beneath the scaffolding of stars" and "I kissed the ruins you left in my mouth" evoke a lyricism that feels both timeless and freshly wounded. He writes with the quiet reverence of someone who has learned that absence can echo louder than presence.

Stylistically, the poems balance control and emotional resonance, often invoking a subtle musicality that invites reading aloud. There's a craft at work here

that never overshadows the heart—the formal decisions serve the feeling, not the other way around. This is not a loud book, but its quietness is its power. These are poems that whisper to the readers, asking them to remember their own vanished lovers, their own private catacombs. It's a collection to return to, especially in the still hours, when the past flickers and language feels like the only bridge across time.

*The Catacombs of Vanished Lovers* is a remarkable offering—tender, lyrical, and deeply human.

Richard Modiano is the winner of the 2022 Joe Hill Prize for labor poetry and is a Pushcart Prize nominee. His collection *The Forbidden Lunchbox* is published by Punk Hostage Press.

**Stylistically,  
the poems balance  
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not the other way around.**

– Richard Modiano

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# HOW TOWN HALLS CAN BE PRODUCTIVE AGAIN

MELINDA BURRELL

“I do think it’s my job to be there and I do think that I need to model the behavior that I want our government to model.”

Nebraska’s Congressman Mike Flood had just gotten a tongue-lashing from constituents at a town hall meeting, facing tough questions and ultimately chants of “vote him out!” by Democrats angered by his support for Trump’s policies.

In an interview with NPR, Rep. Flood said, “I think it’s somewhat cathartic for them to be able to have the opportunity to address their representative government.” He explained that he tells the police before such events, “I do not want anybody removed or arrested. I want them to be able to say what they have to say. This part of the deal, this is the way people feel right now.”

As a community mediator, I had two reactions to his words.

First, I wanted to celebrate Rep. Flood for his insights.

Rep. Flood understands that these meetings are part of the job of elected officials in a democracy, and that it’s normal for meetings to get tense when so many people feel their concerns are not being heard. He also understands the need – especially for leaders — to de-escalate, rather than escalate, tense situations.

Second, I wished more people knew that public meetings

do not have to turn out that way.

Town halls, as well as school board meetings and other public hearings, are an integral part of our democracy. However, the typical format tends to create conflict rather than understanding. People line up for a minute or two at the microphone. They direct concerns to officials often intimidatingly seated on a dais and often prohibited from responding – even to ask clarifying questions.

This approach helps no one. Citizens feel small and ignored, increasingly frustrated and angry.

**Officials can ask their local community mediation centers or other skilled facilitators for help. Our public meetings can become part of our way forward.**

– Melinda Burrell

Officials feel attacked and without a constructive way forward. That’s to be expected. We’re hardwired with a need to feel respected, connected to others, and treated fairly. When we don’t feel that way, our ability to think rationally decreases. We’re also hardwired to crave certainty. If we encounter an information vacuum, we fill it with (often incorrect)

assumptions.

We can use this understanding of our neurobiology to design better meetings. When we feel validated and safe, our defenses come down and we can listen deeply, think creatively, and solve problems. That’s the state we want our town halls to put us in. How? We start by reframing how we think of these meetings, into opportunities for listening and learning, engaging each other, and building trust between people and elected officials. We create meeting agendas that ensure people feel truly heard and respected, which in turn makes them feel secure, relaxed, and able to engage with each other. To do that, conveners can:

Poll communities in advance to create agendas based on peoples’ concerns. Engage skilled, nonpartisan facilitators able to establish norms of respect and guide a conversation enabling people to express themselves and hear each other.

Reach out to a wide range of community members, or take town halls on the road to different parts of the community.

Use live-meeting polling or small group discussions to take the temperature in the room and ensure that quieter folk still express themselves.

Follow up with accessible reports on what was covered and subsequent actions.

Officials can ask their local community mediation centers or other skilled facilitators for help. Our public meetings can become part of our way forward.

Melinda Burrell, PhD is a humanitarian aid worker who studies polarization and trains on the neuroscience of communication and conflict. She is on the board of the *National Association for Community Mediation*, which offers resources on cross-divide engagement.

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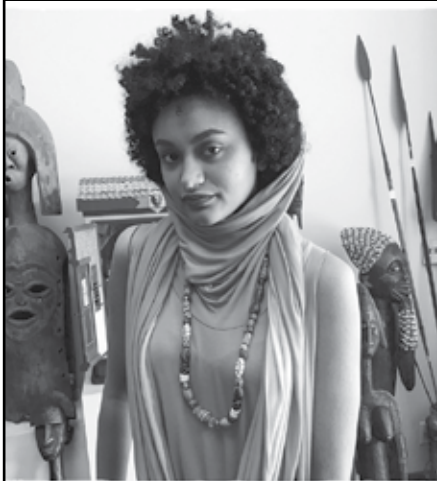
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# TRUMP'S AGGRESSIVE TARIFF POLICY, HIS BIG BEAUTIFUL BILL, ITS TAX CUTS, AND THE IMPACT ON OUR NATIONAL DEBT

HAROLD ZIMMERMAN

**P**resident Trump's worldwide, across-the-board Tariff Policy is currently raising his previous tariff minimum from 10 percent to 15 percent and leveling even heftier tariffs on a multitude of nations starting at 19 percent and going up to 40 percent with as much as 50 percent on India due to its continued purchase of Russian oil.

Here's a further breakdown of tariffs Trump has imposed with rates varying widely, including 35 percent on Canadian goods and compliant items (excluding USMCA, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement), 25 percent on Mexican goods, 50 percent on Brazilian goods, 25 percent on goods from India (plus, as mentioned, an additional 25 percent), 15 percent on Japanese goods, and a current 30 percent on Chinese goods (down from 145 percent) due to a temporary truce expiring this fall on November 9.

Then there's 50 percent tariffs on steel and aluminum imports along with semi-finished copper products. The president is also considering tariffs on semiconductors and pharmaceuticals with potential rates as high as 300 percent on chips and 250 percent on pharmaceuticals and an additional 40 percent tariff on goods found to be transshipped

from other countries to evade higher duties. (For example, goods being manufactured in China, then shipped to third-party countries)

Now with these tariffs, how much has been collected? For the fiscal year to date ending September 30, the total amount of tariffs, taxes, and fees collected is estimated to be \$140.8 billion. Another estimate provided by the Tax Foundation is \$172.1 billion, which focuses on the increase in federal tax revenues due to tariffs. And lastly, there is one estimate for \$400 billion for the entire 2025 year!!

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in the U.S. when  
compared  
with Europe.  
In other words,  
personal wealth  
does buy more years of  
life in the U.S  
than in Europe.**

– Harold Zimmerman

For estimates over a ten-year span from 2025 to 2034, there's the Budget Lab at Yale with \$2.6 trillion to \$2.8 trillion or \$260-\$280 billion per year. They also mention a dynamic analysis which considers negative economic effects lowering this figure to \$2.1 or \$2.4 trillion over the same ten-year period. The Tax Foundation, meanwhile, puts this ten-year estimate at \$2.3 trillion to \$1.5 trillion using dynamic analysis (which registers lesser sales).

Extending Trump's expiring

2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) would decrease federal tax revenue by \$4.5 trillion from 2025 through 2034. But GDP is estimated to be 1.1 percent higher due to higher productivity due to the tax cuts, offsetting \$710 billion, or 18 percent, of tax revenue losses.

Also, Trump's effort to get foreign corporations relocating over here—as demonstrated during his visit to the Middle East earlier this year—will produce more income and, hence, more taxable revenue here. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the U.A.E. will respectively invest \$600 billion, \$1.2 trillion, and \$200 billion to strengthen U.S. manufacturing, investment in A.I. development, and arms purchases for a total investment of \$2 trillion dollars. Japan recently committed to invest \$550 billion on building manufacturing plants here to avoid tariffs they would otherwise have to pay if they produced and imported the same goods (such as cars and computers) from Japan. Also, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent just announced that foreign business investment in manufacturing goods here to avoid tariffs has now reached \$10 trillion.

Even with all this investment, one estimate of Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill with its continuing corporate tax cuts of 21 percent to 15 percent (in some instances) would run a deficit of \$240 billion per year and in ten years amount to \$2.4 trillion. Another puts it at \$380 billion, amounting to \$3.8 trillion in ten years.

AS A RESULT, one CNBC commentator estimated that our Debt could go up to \$55, \$57, or \$58 trillion in ten years. Another independent estimate shows a yearly deficit of as much as \$2.2 trillion (with \$1.2 trillion in yearly budget overruns and with another \$1 trillion in debt servicing costs on borrowed funds (i.e., outstanding U.S. Treasury

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## Sweet Susie

Bonds) that in ten years will amount to \$22 trillion, raising our National Debt to \$60 trillion. Even if our GDP/GNP—currently at about \$30 trillion per year—were to increase, we'd be close to 200 percent of GDP. As stated, our current Debt to GDP is 121.85 percent and economists agree and warn that if our Debt to GDP ratio approached 180 percent, this would be where Our Economy and Our Dollar would be IN REAL TROUBLE!!!

Obviously, the best way to handle our growing National Debt is to simply balance our budget

and NOT spend more than what we take in!! But, in reality, because there are so many things we must do in our society to protect the population's health and safety, to regulate business and prevent fraud, and to provide for defense on land, sea, and in space, that simply is not going to happen. Fortunately, all advanced industrialized G7 nations have national debts that are more than what they make. Our ratio debt to GDP ratio is 121.85. Some nations are even higher. Fact is, it simply takes more to adequately protect and police a society than what we collect

in taxes and, as a result, bonds must be issued in the form of debt to do everything that must be done!! Because of our growing National Debt and the reluctance by China and other nations to buy bonds to help finance our debt, we need to come up with a fresh, novel approach to prevent this from reoccurring,

It will be addressed in the next issue of AMASS.

Harold Zimmerman is an attorney and former auto mechanic/repair shop owner. His current passion is developing creative solutions to problems involving the U.S. economy.



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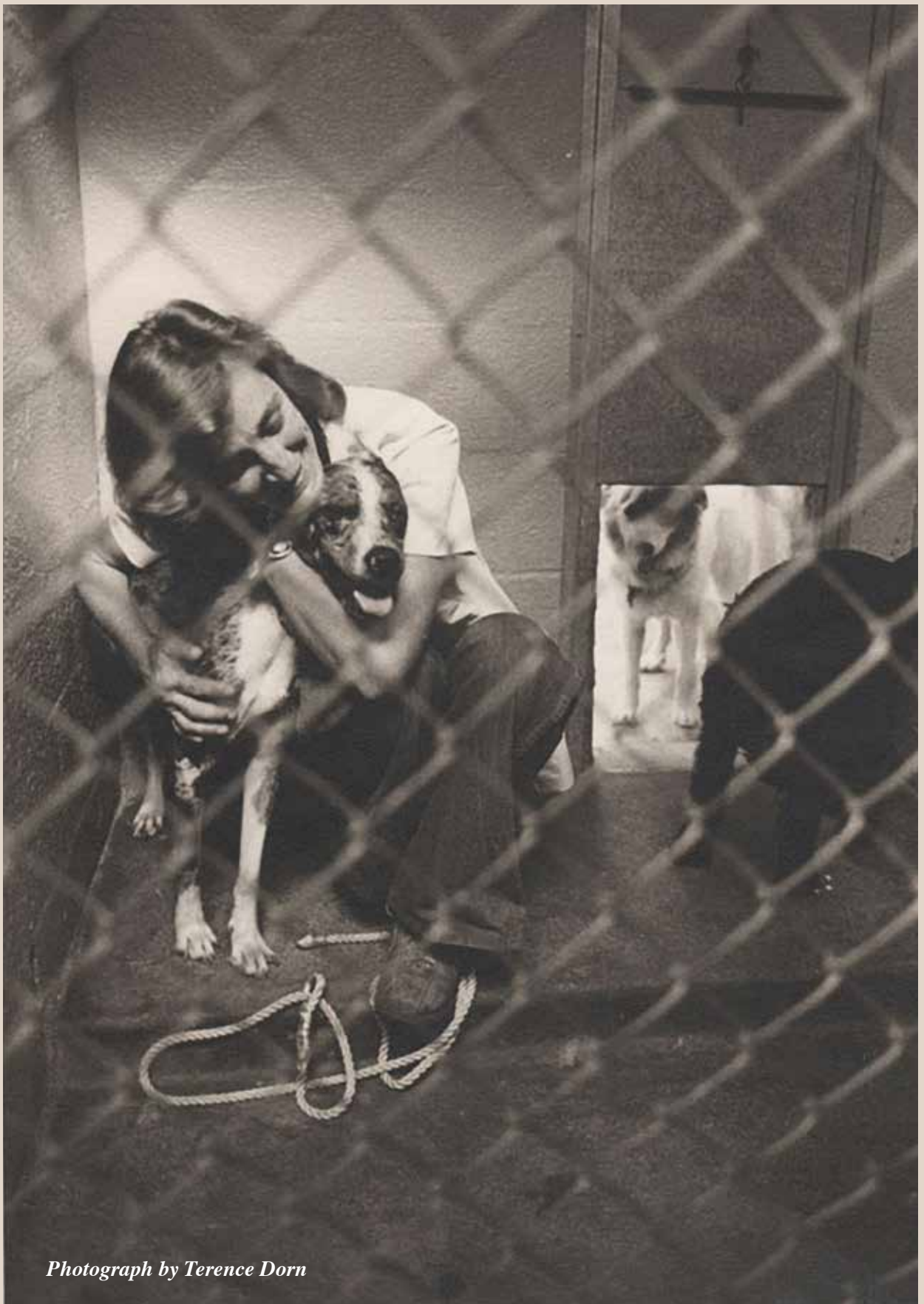
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*– George Orwell*

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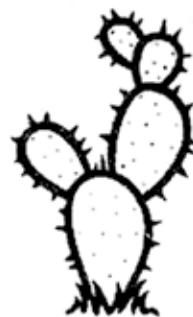
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